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Reshaping the CIA

William H. Webster's resignation as director of the Central Intelligence Agency comes at a pivotal juncture for the nation's intelligence community, as congressional oversight committees debate restructuring proposals for the government's espionage establishment.

Webster took the job at a low point in the CIA's checkered history, soon after the Iran-contra scandal had sullied the agency's reputation. In his four years as director, Webster rehabilitated the CIA's image of straightforwardness and integrity, qualities that he had previously exhibited as a judge on the federal bench and as director of the FBI.

His achievement in restoring public trust in the CIA cannot be overstated. As Bobby Ray Inman, a former deputy director of the CIA, said: "The agency was perilously close four years ago to sliding back into the public image of the rogue elephant. The foremost job that Webster did, and at a

critical time, was to arrest that. However, Webster has been criticized by some in Congress for his failure to develop a plan to reshape American intelligence operations to conform with the more amicable relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union.

More recently, Webster has advocated collecting more intelligence concerning foreign threats to the American economy, such as those from countries that indulge in industrial espionage to uncover American economic strategies.

The person President Bush names to succeed Webster almost certainly will be presiding over a vastly changed intelligence agency, one whose operations more closely reflect the geopolitical realities of the times. Accordingly, Bush should choose someone with a background in intelligence work and an understanding of world politics - a person who is capable both of reshaping the agency and running it effectively and honorably.